

Behind Enemy Lines

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Summary: This is the story of Spartan Eric-151 and his covert ops Team Iota, who officially do not exist. One day, they are sent to an offworld operation for a recon assessment, but on the way there, tragedy strikes. Now on an unknown planet, the Covenant are not the only ones after them, and they must survive against all odds.

1. Prologue

Prologue

Unknown UNSC Space, near UNSC Infinity, 2557

It hadn't even been five years, but UNSC had advanced much further than I had expected. It felt good to be formally recognized for a change. Barely five years ago, I did not exist in the eyes of the UNSC. Back then, I used to be an Iota. There were just three of us. We didn't even have ranks. But we were the best; the cream of the crop. That was why we did what we did. And still to this date I remember the op that changed it all.

* * *

><p>New Alexandria, Reach, 2552, 2 weeks before Fall of Reach

I walked back inside the living room of our apartment.

"Harvest?!" Ivan spat, and his face went dark.

Drew had no response. Her blue eyes remained impassive as always, and it was impossible to read her expression.

I shrugged and replayed the message delivered under the guise of holovision equipment.

The moment I had played it, I had realized that this op was by far the most important undertaken by us. Admiral Parangosky, about to reach her nineties, was speaking, but the projection showed a rerun from Reach's favorite holo-show.

Even in her age, her voice came across as cool, and crisp. You could feel the authority flowing through the speakers. I pressed the replay button.

"Intel shows that large numbers of Covenant battlecruisers have begun amassing in Harvest orbit. They have withdrawn massive ground forces for unknown reasons. You know what to do. This is a recon op, but too dangerous for anyone else. I expect the best from your team, Spartan 151," and with that, Parangosky's voice cut, and the holovision show's audio began playing.

I could sense Ivan's discomfort. He had been born in Harvest. It had been bad enough when it had been glassed, but now he was being forced to return.

Looking at me, he realized what was going through my mind. It was common for such a tightly-knit team as us to be able to do that. He said, "Oh no. It's not about my connection to it, it's just that Harvest is completely under Covenant occupation, and now there has been an increase in the number of cruisers arriving at Harvest. It's a whole PLANET that is full of Covies, not just a single battlecruiser. Yes, we have taken on hordes of Covvies by ourselves, but this is much bigger."

It was obvious he was lying about the former. His discomfort proved it. But he did have a point. This wasn't just a simple see and flee op. However, our status prevented us from contacting ONI. Officially, that message had never been sent. And officially, we had been killed in an Innies raid. There was no way we could say anything, far from negotiating or even refusing.

I pointed this out to him. All of us knew what ONI could do, even against Spartans. Ivan and I knew we would have to do it anyways, but we couldn't bring ourselves to say it. Drew took charge.

"Saddle up Spartans," she said. "We've got a planet to scout."

She got up and grabbed our Alexandria UNSC Base access passes and started to distribute them. I quickly took over. It was my job as leader of Iota. You're getting too caught up with yourself Eric. Mendez would have had your ass for this...

We were ready to leave in less than ten minutes. It was not our best time, but this op was served at an even shorter notice than the rest. As Spartans, it was extremely difficult to come off as civilian. We walked too smoothly. Our communications were too crisp. Everything we did exuded military behavior. To mask that, all of us wore fancy clothing and either carried large backpacks, in Ivan's case, a leather purse, in Drew's case, and a briefcase, in my case.

I was the first to get ready. I wore a crisp, brown shirt, khaki trousers, and fairly comfortable leather shoes, a rarity in Reach. Put together with a cap coat and a large briefcase, no one would have even thought of me as military.

Drew emerged next. She had chosen to wear a pink parka over a white tee-shirt advertising the 2551 Robo-cup and purple jeans, together with a pair of classy blue high heeled shoes. She was looking, by definition, stunning. Most women on Reach yearned to look as good as her, but to me, she was simply Drew-049. As Spartans, our sexual drive had been mostly repressed, so while most of New Alexandria's male population would have been running after her with wagging tongues, Ivan and I felt barely anything towards her except for camaraderie and duty.

Finally Ivan came out. He had taken pains to make himself look aged in an effort to keep to our aliases. Officially, I was Randall Jacobson, and Drew was my wife, Maria Jacobson de Souza, and Ivan was my father, Michael Jacobson. In our profiles I was a travelling businessman in my own firm who dealt in the hospitality business with mainly hotels, Drew was an air hostess in New Alex Airlines and Ivan was retired, having formerly worked as a government servant.

* * *

><p>We left the apartment for the Alexandria Hotel headquarters, which in reality, was an unofficial UNSC base tailored to our needs. Its architecture was spartan, apt for us, the only users of the base. Everything related to our operations " armour, weapons, vehicles and the lot was stationed there. On its own, Alexandria UNSC Base could stay operational for more than fifteen years, assuming its hydroponics farms were still functional to churn out vegetables, and hydrogen combustors had not fallen into disrepair. It had a whole team of scientists who were forced to live there on accounts of keeping our existence classified. Weapon stocks came under the guise of laundry, and the hangar eventually led to a secret exit bay. There was a lone prowler together with a Pelican, two Longswords, and three broadswords in the hangar. There was no use for land vehicles, as most of our ops took place off-world. Today, we would be taking the prowler.</p>

We walked through the reception area, which was always empty to discourage unknowing tourists. It was designed to look less than hospitable. Its paint was peeling, tiles cracked, and cooling system barely functioning. Needless to say, it served its purpose. Civilians regularly steered clear.

As was customary, two ONI operatives dressed in hotel clothing came to us to verify our identities. One quick look at the passes assured them we weren't foolish civilians or cunning Insurrectionists. We walked towards the rusted elevator doors, checking to see if we had been tailed. We called for the lift, and the doors slid open. Upon stepping in, however, the lift did not move. It was not supposed to. After the doors had slid shut, the external display just kept cycling through levels to fool anyone following us that we were actually going somewhere. In actuality, this was a strong room where we would get our fingerprints and eye scanned to prove our identity to the base's AI Hummel. If an outsider had managed to make it past the ONI operatives, then he would have been quickly neutralized by the toxic gas released by Hummel.

After processing our scans and ensuring we were alone, Hummel finally revealed himself. For his personality and voice, it was not surprising he had assigned himself the avatar of a hammer.

"Iota team. Good to see you as always," his gruff tone filled our helmets. "What's today's op?"

Such was our secrecy, that even Hummel was not authorized access to the messages. This time I didn't shy from taking the lead.

"Recon op," I said.

Hummel nearly spat.

"Recon op?! For a Spartan team? And not just any Spartan team, but bloody Iota! Oh, oh. ONI's AI better be good, because I'm gonna â€“"

I sharply cut him off. One word was all that it took.

"Harvest."

For a while there was only the sound of our shoes on the cold metal floor. Then Hummel returned.

"Harvest? You're going to Harvest?!" he exclaimed. "What happened?"

The three of us had now reached our armor-outfitting stations. I explained to Hummel of the situation at Harvest. We undressed and began putting on our combat underskins. Hummel was frantically trawling through data that confirmed what I had just said.

He kept on muttering to himself as we stepped onto our boots, and scientists began to put our armor on. Immediately I noticed a difference.

"Hang on," I asked the scientists. "This isn't our armor. It's too new."

The lead scientist, Dr Klose replied, "Yes. Spot on Spartan. Ivan-079 also noticed. While you were holidaying out in the city, we got a new shipment of your armor. It's a Mark-VI prototype. Not even the Chief has it yet. They're still all at Mark-V, like your previous armor."

"What's new?" I asked.

As the chest piece was connected with the back piece, Dr Klose replied.

"Firstly, there is a faster recharge time on the suits' energy shield system so that you do not have to remain in cover for an extended period of time. Next, is improved synchronization between the suit and user. This allows you to jump higher, run faster, and hit harder than a Spartan could previously. In addition, this equipment has made medical kits obsolete for you Spartans because of the integration of devices that administer medical care of the armor."

The last piece of information was revolutionary. As the helmet was put on, I discussed this with Drew and Ivan, testing the comm system as well.

"Heard that?" I asked them. "No more having to scavenge for a med kit on the field. It's all integrated now!"

Drew, replied customarily â€“ short and precise.

"That'll save us a lot of time."

Ivan chipped in.

"Effort and ammo too," he said.

Dr Klose then came on the radio.

"When you Spartans are done testing your comms and harping about how good this Mark-VI is, you can come over to the shield test station," he said.

As we walked to the shield test stations, I looked around, admiring the HUD. It had become much more cleaner, freeing up space on the top left for grenade ammo indication, and had put the shield indicator right above the motion tracker on the bottom left.

One of the scientists told me, "Step into the red box Spartan Eric."

I obliged, and I watched closely as my shields were taken down and allowed to recharge. It definitely was much faster than our Mark-Vs. The warning was more audible too.

The scientist at the station also asked us to test our camo. Even in prototype, it worked flawlessly.

"It will last for a total of fifteen seconds, and takes ten seconds to recharge. During the fifteen seconds, you'll be no more than a shimmer in the air," he said.

Dr Klose came on the radio again.

"Well done Spartans, you're good to go. From what I've heard, you'll be taking the prowler, right?" he asked.

"Affirmative," I said.

Hummel came on. The shock and panic that he was exhibiting a few minutes ago was all gone.

"Wonderful Spartans. Now, which one of you will be carrying me?" he queried.

Without replying, I sauntered over to his module, yanked his chip, and slotted it into my neural interface at the rear of my helmet.

"Spartan Eric, I see," he spoke.

Immediately I could feel Hummel flood into my brain, cooling everything as he went. There was a part of it which made me feel funny. I shook my head to clear the effect, which subsided.

I walked up to the bay doors of the prowler, UNSC Iota " named in our honour " and saw that Drew, the pilot of our team, was already running through the pre-flight checklists. I was her navigator, and Ivan would be manning the weapon systems.

"We're good to go," said Drew. "Put him in."

I proceeded to take Hummel out and put him into the prowler's AI interface. Meanwhile, Ivan had come aboard and was running tests on the weapon systems.

"Ivan?" I asked.

"All green," came the reply.

"Good. Hummel? Let's go," I spoke.

"Roger that sir," he said.

I strapped myself into an empty seat as Hummel spun up the engines, and Drew activated the cloaking. To the scientists, we were quite visible due to a shimmer in the air, but in space, no one could see us. Even the radar would be deflected.

"Launch in 5," said Hummel.

I counted down. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. And with no more than a whine, we were off. We emerged top-side in less than five seconds, and with no effort were climbing through the cloud layer.

"Fifty-thousand feet," Hummel informed us.

"Hundred. Exiting Reach's atmosphere in under a minute."

I waited, consulting the charts, and the location of our emergence. The Shaw-Fujikawa translight engine was known to be quite inaccurate, sometimes placing us millions of kilometers away from where we should have been.

"We're free from the atmosphere. Whenever you're ready Spartan-049," Hummel said.

Without a word, Drew activated our FTL drives, and we punched through space to enter slipspace. It would take about one Earth rotation to reach Harvest, and I planned on making the most of the time to discuss strategies and warm up with simulated combat exercises. And when we would emerge, we would be in the thick of it.

I shook my head. Time wasn't on our side.

2. Chapter 1

Chapter 1

In Slipspace, en route to Harvest, 2552, 2 weeks before Fall of Reach

Even though the UNSC was devoting nearly all its resources to the Spartan programme, artificial simulation technology fit for Spartans

still had not been developed. Word was that Spartans were too good for even the hardest settings on the simulator and could finish those missions in five minutes for which standard Marines took half an hour. Nevertheless I had ensured the Marine combat simulator had still been installed.

"Hummel, take over the ship's controls. We're going to do some combat exercises, and then we'll sleep. Alert us when we're an hour from exit," I said.

Drew got up from the pilot's chair, her black visor reflecting the bridge of the prowler. I radioed Ivan to meet us in the training room as Drew and I jogged a short distance.

When all of us were present, I announced my plan for the training. It was quite logical. We were going into completely hostile territory with no back up and prototype systems. It was now time to test those systems, weed out irregularities and suit ourselves to the new combat options offered by the new armour. Naturally, I dialled up the simulator to the highest setting and set the terrain similar to Harvest. The mission would be to infiltrate a heavily fortified Covenant base, capture a Forerunner artefact in their possession, and destroy the base as we left. Daunting for even ODSTs, but simple for Spartans.

"Alright Iota, grab your weapons. We'll be starting the mission with a drop into a Covvie dark zone. Mission is simple, infiltrate, take, and destroy," I finished.

I moved over to the weapons rack. Being skilled in close quarter engagements, I grabbed myself a shotgun and a DMR for mid-range engagements. Ivan, the heavy weapons specialist, grabbed a Spartan Laser and an Assault Rifle, while Drew took the SRS99 and the DMR as the sniper. We discussed strategies, and then gave Hummel the green light. The weapons rack then retracted and the room was transformed into a dark, rocky valley. The simulation had begun.

"Maintain radio silence for the time being," I said, and two green lights on my HUD blinked in acknowledgement.

I activated the VISR mode available for night missions and watched as Drew climbed up to a safe vantage point to scout the path ahead. For a few seconds Ivan and I remained crouched, waiting for Drew's signal, then three shots rang out and Drew's green light blinked again. It was safe to move on.

I signalled to Ivan to move forward until the area where Drew could keep an eye on us. We sprinted forward and soon came across a fast flowing river with no way across. Ahead lay a sleeping patrol of Grunts and two Elites who were pacing a small perimeter around a few methane tanks, their purple glow causing the Grunts to look more menacing than they actually were. I flashed a red light to Drew, a signal not to fire. If she did, Ivan and I would be left in the open. I noticed the walking pattern of the two Elites. They were walking in a near perfect rhythm, with only a split second where one did not cover the other's blind spot. Our run had to be perfect. I looked at the Elites for a moment longer then nodded at Ivan. We activated our camouflage and broke into a sprint and jumped across the river. Right now the Elites could have noticed us out of the corner of their eyes had we not been cloaked. Just as the Elites turned, leaving each

other blind for the split second, we pounced upon them, combat knives at the ready. In the moment of shock that the Elites experienced, we had driven the knives fully into the Elites' necks. Hearing the commotion, the Grunts woke up. There were eight of them. Too easy, I mused. Flashing green to Drew, I grabbed my shotgun and blasted the nearest Grunt. Ivan opened up with his Assault Rifle, the shredder rounds piercing into the skin of two of the diminutive aliens. Meanwhile, Drew had expertly taken out four of the Grunts with her sniper. I whirled around. The last Grunt was nowhere to be seen. I scanned around quickly to try and spot it. If it got a message out to the other patrols, we would be in deep shit.

"There!" Ivan pointed out. I looked at where he was pointing. Sure enough, the orange methane pack of the Grunt was visible, bobbing up and down as it tried to escape.

Drew was still reloading, so I swapped the shotgun for my DMR and squeezed off a round into the frantic Grunt in the distance. Purple blood spurted out, and the Grunt fell face-first into the dirt, dead.

That Grunt should not have had gotten away. We're getting slack.

Ivan looked around, making sure no one else had seen us. I motioned for him to move forward, and gave Drew the green indicator to move on.

A few minutes later, a blue glow was visible in the distance. That was our target — a generator supplying power to the Covenant base. I marked a waypoint over it and motioned for Ivan to activate his camouflage alongside me. We had gone over the plan while discussing. I would sneak in and deactivate the shield. Once that was done, Ivan would use his Spartan Laser to take the generator out while Drew and I wreaked havoc in the guards' midst.

I slowly walked up to the activation switch, and cautiously pressed it. The blue shield collapsed, waking every sleeping Grunt. There were close to a hundred there. On cue, five Elites came rushing out of the complex to find out the cause of the alarm. I keyed my com.

"Now!" I yelled.

Four quick shots rang out, dropping four of the Sangheili Minors. Meanwhile, I could see Ivan charging up his Spartan Laser. I decloaked and pumped my shotgun in the last Minor's face, and whirled around to face the frantic Grunts, when suddenly the world stopped. The ground shook vehemently, throwing me to the ground and I noticed that every Grunt was frozen in place. Something had gone wrong with the ship.

The ~~faÃ§ade~~ disappeared and the combat room's grey interior came back into view. Drew rushed to the pilot's console and Ivan sprinted to the weapons systems. I carefully got back up. What had happened?

"Hummel, report!" Drew asked. The hull shuddered again, this time more violent.

"Gravitational anomaly ma'am, we won't last long in slipspace. Recommend dropping out now to sort out the problems," the AI replied.

Drew looked to me. I pondered a while, just trying to deal with the setback. I nodded once.

"Do it," she said.

As quickly as they had gone, the stars appeared in the main view screen. We were out.

"Hummel, engage cloaking. Find out where we are," I said.

"Roger, cloaking now. Attempting to match present coordinates," was the reply.

Suddenly Hummel came on again, this time more panicked.

"Oh shit, shit, shit, shit. Contacts incoming!" he rushed.

I looked at our radar â€“ nothing. I was about to question Hummel, when rapidly, our radar started to beep uncontrollably.

Drew tapped away furiously at the consoles and told me, "Thre â€“ fifteen â€“ goddamnit, how many are there?!"

I could only whisper "Shit". Drew looked up and made eye contact with me. We looked outside. In perfect formation, fifty-two supercarriers emerged out of neat, pinpoint holes in space.

Ivan murmured, "Oh for fâ€ Not goodâ€ not good at all!"

I went into overdrive.

"Drew! Kill all power now! Hummel, you're coming out. We can't risk them noticing you! Ivan, shut down weapon systems!"

Drew replied, "Already done!"

Ivan simply flashed green, shocked at such a catastrophic turn of events.

I ran over to Hummel's console and yanked him out, and put his crystal into my helmet. This time I ignored the strange sensation in my head. Hummel kindly did not speak. Looking up at the big purple hulls had stopped me cold. All of our bio signs were inflated. Our hearts pumped rapidly, adrenalin flowing through our veins. Slowly, but surely, the bulbous noses of a whole covenant fleet came into view. Things were about to get ugly.

"Status?" I queried.

Drew responded, "Running completely dark. Engines, weapons and reactors offline. Cloaked from radar and view. We're drifting."

I nodded. At least they wouldn't detect or see us. I cursed no one in particular. We were Spartans. We weren't bred for ship combat. Space wasn't for us. The feeling of helplessness was horrible. We belonged on the ground, blasting our way through with proper guns. Every

Spartan shared this sentiment. It was why most of us liked to sleep through the whole thing in cryo.

I looked at the carriers. Something seemed offâ€¢ the ships didn't seem like standard Covenant ships. They somehow seemed more primitive. I mentally counted the protruding spikes from the nearest carrier â€" two from the bow. The number checked out with previous encounters with CCS-class battlecruisers. I dismissed the minor discrepancy. There was a more pressing matter at hand. Why were they bringing capital ships used for glassing to this unknown, undiscovered system? Was it an intermediate jump in preparation to hit one of our planets?

Hummel chose this moment to pipe up.

"Uh, Spartan, while I was scanning, I found something. Switching your helmet view to a camera feed I recorded," he said.

The bridge of the prowler disappeared, and I found myself looking from the front of the prowler facing rear. The sudden disorientation was of minimal concern, however. As I looked around, the appearance of the Covenant ships was comparatively nothing to what filled my view. I stared, mouth agape.

"Spartan Eric, your bio signs are unhealthy, please calm down," Hummel said.

I barely heard him. I quickly routed my feed to Ivan's and Drew's helmets as well. We were now collectively looking at a giant metal planet.

I whispered in fear, "That's not natural, is it?"

"Negative Spartan," Hummel said.

Ivan asked, cowed as well, "Can we get a live feed?"

Hummel asked me for confirmation. It was a small chance that the Covenant would be able to identify a small camera, but it was chance enough. Still, I allowed it. Now, the live feed was playing. The Covenant carriers had passed over us and were orbiting the planet. Surely enough, they began releasing multiple fighters and troop carriers. We watched with bated breath. However, the spacecraft just hovered, waiting. This puzzled all of us, even Hummel. The Covenant never waited for anything, never gave anyone respite â€" what the hell was going on?

"Hummel, pull up every bit of data you have of Covenant ships just doingâ€¢ this," I wildly gesticulated to the scene unfolding before us. "We need to know why they are doing this."

"Roger that, Spartan. Commencing search."

I waited. Thirty seconds passed. By now any smart-AI would have had pulled up the data. I queried Hummel.

"Ah, Spartan, I'm uh, facing unexpected difficulties in pulling dataâ€¢ the Covenant have never seem to done thisâ€¢ I'm scanning, and â€" wait hold onâ€¢ here's a video feed from Spartan 117's first contact with Mgalekgolo in the CÃ©te d'Azur Museum of National

History," he said, as he routed the years old record to my helmet feed.

/OPENING RECORDS

2552

>SIGMA OCTANUS IV
CÃ'te d'Azur
>CÃ'te d'Azur Museum of National History<p>

PLAY

"Look at them. They've even crushed their own forces under their feet because the Kig-Yar and Unggoy attempted to reach that Forerunner crystal! That's it! When faced with objects that they revered, objects made by their Gods â€“ the Forerunners, they're going to try their very best to keep it from harm!" he excitedly said, as I watched the recording with fascination. This was the Master Chief. John. The Spartan _I _had only known. When we were still recruits.

STOP

CLOSING RECORDS/

I blinked twice and shook my head to clear that memory from my mind.

"Guys, I think Hummel's cracked it. They're waiting for a signal from their damned Gods. This is a Forerunner planet," I announced.

Drew was the only one to acknowledge.

"Figures," she said.

This was a big development. I started thinking of ways to get out of here. I had heard stories of how Covenant would refuse to fire their weapons in places where they could damage one of their sacred relics or artefacts. But they were still stories. If we could successfully get our ship between the planet and the Covenant ships, we might be able to jump into slipspace and prevent any of them from following or even shooting at us.

I asked Hummel, "What's the status of our translight engines?"

Hummel paused and replied, "They're out sir. The sudden deceleration from slipspace did it. We need mechanic crews to solve the problem. The supplies are lacking."

My heart sank. Our chances of escape were gone. Either we died of lack of resources, or the Covenant would blast us to hell. I picked the latter to be more probable.

"What about our sublight engines?" I queried.

Thankfully, Hummel had good news.

"Those are completely fine, but I wouldn't recommend trying to start them now. There are too many small and manoeuvrable crafts that could get us before the carriers do. Let's wait," Hummel said.

I broke my train of thought, surprised. This was unexpected from Hummel. Usually he would have suggested other ways to circumnavigate the problem, but right now, the situation was so dire that even he could not do anything. So, we waited.

A few hours passed, but the view had barely changed. Some of the troop carriers had returned to the cruisers, but multiple attack craft were regularly flying around the planet. That was when it happened, and I was so bored, I had almost missed it. One of the Space Banshees was lazily flying around when it had accidentally triggered its boost while facing the planet. And then, it impacted the surface of the planet and blew up. The revelation was startling. The planet was not like any other planet any of us had ever seen. It was quite literally a hollow ball of something. It dawned upon me that the Forerunners had probably used such a design to improve the exterior defences — a tactic which was working extremely well. This was news to all of us, and within seconds Hummel had a plan.

We would engage the main systems, devote full power to the engines and attempt to enter the planet. It was brilliant, considering the Covenant would be kept out, however, as Ivan put it, there was a tiny problem. Getting inside the planet. For all we knew, the Forerunners would not allow anyone except themselves to enter, and we would be sitting ducks in the face of the multiple fighter crafts, let alone the cruisers.

Then, Drew noticed something.

"Hummel," she asked. "Am I the only one who notices the Banshees have virtually all been withdrawn? It's practically just the cruisers now. It's the best time to try our luck."

I looked more carefully. She was right — there were approximately only ten attack craft now. However to enter the planet, we would have to get past them, and I was not willing to use our only weapons. They were meant solely for defensive purposes. Even if we made it inside, there was no telling if there would be inhabitants, and if there would be, then if they would be hostile. I resisted mentioning that the chances of us actually surviving were extremely close to nil. Instead I told her that we should instead wait a while more. In hindsight the decision was extremely selfish, but the sheer scale of this whole situation was huge, and Spartan as I was, I wanted to see more of what the Covenant would do.

Drew notified me that we were drifting closer to the planet every second. We had been so panicked at the sight of the fifty-two cruisers that we had forgot to arrest our movement completely. I kicked myself inwardly. Our month of hiatus had thrown us off the hook. First me, not taking the lead, then the Grunt in the simulation getting away, and now this. This was too much. I was still debating on a course of action, when suddenly a bright orange wave of light swept the ship with a sickening screech.

I exploded, partly in fear, partly in anger.

"What the hell was that?!"

Just as abruptly, the communications console came to life. I jerked my head around, looking at Drew. She raised her hands in

denial.

"Hummel!" I began, angry and worried that he had violated my order.

He quickly cut me off.

"Wasn't me. Look for yourself. We've been hacked. Someone is contacting us," he said.

I went over. The message, a simple binary code, repeated itself over and over again. Hummel translated what I was seeing.

/[BEGIN TRANSMISSION. FORERUNNER SHIELD WORLD 43121124 DESIGNATE REQUIEM]

WELCOME RECLAIMERS. PASSAGE IS OPEN.

/[END TRANSMISSION.]/

I began to ask what it meant, when Drew pointed out something.

"We've got bigger problems. Look."

I looked at the view screen, and swore. Two of the cruisers had noticed us, and were turning to align their weapons with our ship. Angry red lasers began to form up on the sides.

It was now or never. I inserted Hummel back into the prowler's console and spoke to everyone.

"Switch on all systems. Power the engines to 130%. Weapon systems on the ready. We're going in."

3. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

July 13 2552, In Requiem Orbit, 2 weeks before Fall of Reach

I strapped myself down as Hummel pushed the engines to beyond their recommended safe limits. Usually prowlers only hit 110% on their engines. Sustaining 130% often resulted in reactor overload. Not that it would matter if the Covenant got us first.

Drew, who was monitoring the radar, informed me of the countless fighters launching from the cruisers' bays.

"Heads up Iota! Banshees and Seraphs inbound!" she said.

"Ivan! Ready pulse laser turrets and arm the Shiva nuclear missiles. Fire on my mark," I ordered.

Ivan replied, "Shiva nukes armed, pulse lasers firing."

We struck the first volley against the fighter craft. Ivan's pinpoint accuracy and enhanced senses allowed him to take down three Banshees and one Seraphs before the cruisers fired. This time it was Hummel

who warned me.

"Enemy lasers incoming!" he informed.

As good as Drew was, she could not evade the fighters and the cruisers at the same time. I told her to transfer control to Hummel, to which she grudgingly obliged. I watched as white hot beams of plasma ripped through space even tearing up the Covenant's own fighters just to get at us. As ruthless as the Covenant were, however, Hummel was better. As he sent the prowler into a dive, I realized his plan. The asteroid field approached closer and closer, just as the plasma fire was. Majority of the shots hit the asteroids, causing showers of rock to impact our shields. One shot, however, managed to hit us.

"Shields are down! Repeat we have no shields!" Drew yelled.

"Relax Spartan, I'll get you out of this mess," Hummel said reassuringly, but to be honest, we were not the least bit reassured. The words of John echoed in my mind.

"_Space battles are not meant for Spartans. We do what we do best on the ground. You're never truly in command in space._"

Ivan was still pounding away with the pulse laser turrets, tearing up any Banshee or Seraph that managed to follow Hummel in the asteroid field. I looked out of the view screen and realized that within seconds, we would have to emerge from the asteroid field, where now, three of the cruisers were waiting in a triangle position for us. The biggest blocked our path directly. Drew's announcement next was not helpful.

"Oh shit. They've armed plasma torpedoes," Drew breathed.

I had to act fast.

"Ivan, when we emerge, release all fourteen HORNET Mines. Make sure they are in intercept trajectory of the plasma torpedo that will be launched. Blow them up on my mark! Hummel, take over the pulse laser turrets as well," I said.

"Sir! HORNET Mines armed and ready to roll!" said Ivan.

Hummel simply acknowledged the take over with a blink in my HUD.

"Good. Hummel, set course for the Covenant cruiser straight ahead. Aim for its top," I continued.

Hummel obliged, but still asked, "Sir?"

"You'll see Hummel," I said.

We emerged. Immediately hordes of enemy fighters started swarming us, peppering our bare hull with plasma bolts. Hummel presently opened up with an accuracy that surpassed even Ivan. I watched as our hull integrity dropped lower as Drew called out the numbers.

Come on, come on, I desperately wished.

For a brief moment the path cleared. That was our chance.

"Ivan, mark!" I barked.

On cue, fourteen stealthed HORNET nuclear mines were ejected from our weapons bay, taking up positions around the three carriers, and of course, overlapping their areas of effect to ensure premature detonation of the plasma torpedo.

I issued another order.

"Ivan, arm six nuclear warheads!"

"Arming warheadsâ€| armed!"

We waited, Hummel destroying enemy craft with precision that only of an AI. Our hull integrity was now at a measly 43%. Unable to wait anymore, one cruiser fired two torpedos. A purple ball of fire arced towards our ship, a purple ball that was capable of destroying complete frigates in one shot. Our odds of survival should have been less than 1%... if not for the HORNET mines. I whacked the detonation button. The space around us lit up in beautiful chaos. Hummel whooped. The prowler shook violently as the nuclear shockwave slammed into us.

"Report!" I yelled.

Drew replied.

"Hull integrity at 7%. Carnage report is as follows. Two hundred and forty one fighter craft destroyed, one cruiser destroyed, one with heavy damage. Plasma torpedo detonated prematurely, contributing to heavy damage to the closest cruiser, but there's still one tracking us."

I looked at the radar screen. True enough, the deafening blare of the warning system had still not died down. Not only that, red lances were beginning to light up all across the side of the cruiser in front. I still had one trick up my sleeve, though. I ran the numbers in my head, wishing that I had paid more attention to DÃ©jÃ 's trigonometry lessons.

I asked, "Hummel, you've still got the coordinates locked on that ship in front?"

"Yes Spartan," was the reply.

"Good. Push the engines to 150%, then get ready to switch trajectory to 43 344 3D S88 90 F8 on my mark."

"Roger."

I watched the plasma torpedo get closer. With its tracking system non-functional on board the cruiser we had destroyed, it was dangerously close to simply dissipating its energy without it. For once I hoped that it would stay true to our tail. The cruiser in front of us grew closer, and with a tell-tale sign that it was going to fire, its shields drop.

I yelled "Mark!"

Hummel yanked the prowler into a steep 50 degree climb as we scraped the hull of the cruiser. Plasma lances flew all around us but Hummel miraculously managed to keep us intact.

"Hull integrity at 4%!" warned Drew.

Then we were past the cruiser. I switched to rear cameras as my hopes came true. Without its tracking system, the plasma torpedo simply continued on its current path, and impacted the largest cruiser, which had dropped its shields to fire at us. Purple fire blossomed from the cruiser as it began to list to port, explosions gutting the whole of the ship.

Hummel noted wryly, "Copying the Keyes Loop eh? Nice."

I noticed with a frown that seven more cruisers were powering towards us, determined to succeed where the prior three had failed.

As we collected ourselves, Drew reminded us of our hull integrity.

This was bad. Assuming this Forerunner planet had even a semblance of normal atmosphere, we would burn up on entry like a rag. However, the good news was that the Covenant was going to be taught a lesson to remember.

The cruiser impacted by the plasma torpedo, more damaged than the others, listed badly to its side, venting plasma and atmosphere. Its engines were all but destroyed â€“ how it managed to even keep floating was a nod to the superior Covenant systems aboard their ships. One cruiser had taken the brunt of the blast in the underside, though, leaving its plasma turrets still somewhat operational. The carnage was beautiful, but more was to follow.

"Hummel, continue your work with the ship's turrets and navigation. Take us into the planet. Ivanâ€| fire three SHIVA nukes on each cruiser whenever you get a targeting solution!" I ordered.

"Trying, tryingâ€| there! Firing six SHIVA nukes now!" Ivan crowed triumphantly.

The prowler shuddered as six of UNSC's most powerful nuclear missiles streaked away at their targets. However, the battle still had not been won. The Covenant were opening up with their lasers again, not at us, but at the missiles.

"Ivan, transfer missile control to Hummel. We have to make sure the Covenant don't get a shot on it!"

Ivan duly obliged, and the three of us watched with bated breath as Hummel jinked and danced the nukes past white hot streams of plasma fire tearing through space. It was almost as if Hummel practised such things like an art form. After what seemed like an eternity, all six missiles hit home. With no shields to defend itself, the Covenant cruiser disintegrated horribly.

All three of us released breaths that we didn't notice we had been holding in. I assigned Ivan to mop up the final pockets of resistance, most of which were attempting to return to the remaining

forty-nine carriers. They would be all over us in seventy-seven seconds.

"Hummel, what's the status of our engines?" I asked.

"Maximum operating capacity is at 50%. I suggest we play it safe and only use only forty," he replied.

I grunted.

"Noted Hummel. Take us in at 50%," I told him. We'd need all the distance we could get.

Our engines spooled up and we began closing the distance between us and the mysterious planet.

Our communications console beeped again. I opened the message.

/_[BEGIN TRANSMISSION. FORERUNNER SHIELD WORLD 43121124 DESIGNATE REQUIEM]_

_UPLOADING APPROACH PATH DESIGNATE 431002 TO YOUR NAVIGATION SYSTEM. PLEASE DO NOT STRAY FROM THE ASSIGNED APPROACH. RECLAIMERS, YOUR PRESENCE IS UTMOST WELC- MESSAGE UNXPCTD TERMINATION _

_-[CONTINUE MESSAGE]-

YOUR PRESENCE IS A MERE BLOTCH IN THIS SYSTEM, HUMANS. YOU WILL BE DEALT WITH LIKE WE DEALT WITH YOU BEFORE. THIS TIME YOU WILL NOT BE SPARED. NOT EVEN THE LIBRARIAN CAN STOP US NOW. THE PROMETHEANS HAVE RETURNED.

-[END TRANSMISSION]/

I looked up, my head abuzz with ideas. What had happened? First, the planet had been welcoming us, assigning us safe passage, but obviously someone inside the planet, someone calling themselves Prometheans had hijacked the message midway. And they had sent us a warning. Who were these people?

Ivan clambered down his console and walked up to me. Both he and Drew were looking at me, expecting a definite answer to a question none of us knew how to answer. Should we go in?

End
file.